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The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's Multivalent Tower of Faces

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The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's
Multivalent Tower of Faces

by

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Abstract

THE UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM'S MULTIVALENT TOWER OF FACES

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Holocaust survivor Dr. Yaffa Eliach collected over 6,000 photographs depicting residents of Eishyshok, a small Jewish settlement in Eastern Europe, taken between 1890 and 1941. Eliach survived the Nazi-led massacre in 1941 that killed nearly the entire Jewish population of Eishyshok. As a way to commemorate the destroyed town of her youth she began to collect photographs from other survivors and residents who fled Europe prior to the Holocaust. She subsequently selected 1,032 photographs from the Yaffa Eliach Shtetl Collection for display in The Tower of Faces, a permanent exhibition in The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, located in Washington, DC.

The Tower of Faces is a multivalent exhibition. What the photographs represent has changed as time has passed and the collection has served multiple purposes. For Eliach, who has a personal connection to the collection and to events the images have come to represent, the exhibition is a monument within a memorial museum that specifically visually depicts and commemorates Eishyshok and its residents. Once the photographs were accessioned into the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's

permanent collection exhibition designers and curators used the photographs to facilitate a connection between visitors who may not have a direct association to the Holocaust.

For visitors, the familial photographs do not represent direct memories or evidence of atrocity, as they do for Eliach. Rather, the Tower of Faces is a site of postmemory and the photographs is what connects the Holocaust to Eliach's memory of the Holocaust to visitors' understanding of the Holocaust.

Introduction

Dr. Yaffa Eliach, a child survivor of the Holocaust, collected over 6,000 photographs depicting Jewish residents of Eishyshok, a shtetl or small Eastern European market town, between 1890 and 1941. She subsequently selected photographs from the Shtetl Collection for the Tower of Faces (see figure 1), a permanent exhibition in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM), located in Washington, DC, which opened in 1993. The collection is a visual record of Eishyshokians before a Nazi mobile killing squad murdered nearly all of the Jewish residents during a massacre in 1941.

As time passed and the events of the Holocaust became memories kept by those who experienced them, the purpose of the photographs changed. They were once ordinary, personal mementos that belonged to Eishyshokians, but now, as extraordinary survival objects, they represent Holocaust atrocities, commemorate victims and devastated communities. This thesis will explain that the Tower of Faces is multivalent, as the collection is inherently multipurpose. The Shtetl Collection is related to what the photographs formerly represented – how Eishyshokians used the photographs to remember people, places, and occasions, what the shtetl photographers and those photographed chose to visually record, and why Eliach collected the photographs and memorialized Eishyshok. The photographs, which are conventional familial images, are also used to depict shtetl life prior to the Holocaust, while commemorating innocent

victims who resided in such Jewish communities. In effect, the museum uses the collection as a synecdoche, meaning that the images of Eishyshokians represent all Jewish shtetl residents who were affected by the Holocaust, thereby relating the photographs to a larger Holocaust narrative in order to resonate with visitors who may not have a personal association with Eishyshok.

The first chapter will provide a historical overview of Eishyshok before, during, and after the 1941 massacre, as well as describe Eliach's experience during the Holocaust and her personal and professional intentions for researching and collecting the photographs. The chapter also reviews the planning and creation of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum from the perspective of curators, exhibition designers, architects, and founding members. The second chapter will describe the layout of the museum and how visitors physically encounter the Tower of Faces. The chapter scrutinizes the characteristics of the exhibition that distinguish it from the rest of the permanent exhibition in the museum, including the layout and the type of objects exhibited. The final chapter looks at how the photographs are displayed and in what ways the exhibition is related to familial photographs presented in albums as well as the Jewish tradition of creating memorial books to remember communities affected by genocide. The chapter focuses on Marianne Hirsch's theory of postmemory as it relates to the Shtetl Collection. This theory describes a powerful and very particular form of memory that is connected to objects or an outside source and is created not through recollection but through representation.¹ The photographs in the exhibition pre-date events that tragically affected Eishyshokians thus, the images do not depict atrocities that indicate a connection

¹ Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 22.

to the Holocaust. Despite this fact, the photographs in the Tower of Faces are related to the Holocaust and facilitate a postmemorial experience for visitors. For Eliach, the photographs connect personal memory to the history of the shtetl. For visitors, the photographs represent Eliach's personal memory and they facilitate an understanding of the Holocaust through her memories.

Chapter One

Eliach was born Yaffa Sonenson in Eishyshok in May 1937 to a prominent Jewish family whose roots in the shtetl went back several centuries. She was four-years-old when *Einsatzgruppen* (Nazi mobile killing squads) entered the shtetl and massacred thousands of Eishyshokians. In 1987 she received a Guggenheim fellowship that enabled her to return to the shtetl for the first time since 1945. Upon her arrival to what was once among the oldest Jewish settlements in Eastern Europe, Eliach discovered there was not a single Jewish resident. Furthermore, the town's archives omitted the word "Jew," the main synagogue had become a sports complex, the Jewish cemeteries were destroyed, and all other Jewish traces had been systemically eradicated.² The only recognition of events that took place during the Holocaust was a drab concrete plaque inscribed with the misleading dedication: to "The Victims of Fascism, 1941-1944." Eliach's most prevalent fear had been confirmed; the Jews of Eishyshok had died a "double death," meaning that they were physically murdered during the Holocaust and their memory had been "obliterated in the post-Holocaust era."³ She determined that by visually representing the Jewish shtetl she had once called home and its residents she could create a more historically accurate and significant memorial.⁴ Through painstaking years of research,

² Edward T. Linenthal, "The Boundaries of Memory: The United States Holocaust Museum." *American Quarterly* 46.3 (1994), 415.

³ Ibid., 415.

⁴ Yaffa Eliach, *There Once Was a World: A 900-Year Chronicle of the Shtetl of Eishyshok* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1998), 5.

Eliach was able to collect photographs that depict nearly every Jew who lived in the shtetl during the twentieth century, “including those who had emigrated from it, those who had been privileged to die a natural death in it, those who had perished there or nearby during the Holocaust, and the handful of Holocaust survivors who had somehow lived to tell the tale.”⁵

In Eliach’s estimation Eishyshok was the paradigmatic small Jewish market town. It was founded during the ninth century at the crossroads of Poland, Lithuania, and Russia (three countries that had the largest concentration of Jewish residents for hundreds of years preceding the Holocaust), in close proximity to Vilna, which had been a major cultural center in Lithuania since the 16th century, and had a world-renowned yeshiva (a traditional Jewish educational institution).⁶ Prior to the Holocaust there were 5,000 people living in Eishyshok, of whom 3,500 were Jewish; by 1945 only 114 Eishyshokian Jews were still alive and only one resided in the town.

On Sunday, September 21, 1941, the eve of Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, *shaulisti* (Lithuanian guards working for the Nazis) ordered all Jewish residents to

⁵ Ibid., 6.

⁶ Though Eishyshok’s physical location never changed, control of the town did change multiple times during the early 20th century. It was especially susceptible to changing control due to its location on the border of Lithuania, a country that was situated between feuding nations during the 20th century. German government occupied the town during World War I. Following the war Poland took control until the end of October 1939 when the government ceded Vilna and the surrounding region, including Eishyshok. For a brief time the Lithuanian shtetl was autonomous, but in June 1940 the Soviet army crossed the Lithuanian border and Eishyshok was under Communist rule. A year later advancing German troops lead to Nazi occupation. Following World War II, Eishyshok, like the rest of Lithuania, was under Soviet-Russian control until the re-establishment of the country in 1990. For a detailed political history of Eishyshok see Eliach, *There Once Was A World*.

surrender valuables and report to one of the three synagogues. Moshe Sonenson, Eliach's father, sent his two eldest children, Yaffa and Yitzak, to hide in safety at the home of their Polish nanny, while he hid in the forest. Zipporah, Eliach's mother, refused to leave her own mother, thus they were gathered with the rest of the shtetl's Jews when the German Strike Commando 3 *Einsatzgruppen* began the roundup. After being locked in the synagogues for three days and two nights, the Jewish residents were ordered outside into the horse market. They were kept overnight and in the morning, on September 25th, in the midst of morning prayers, *shaulisti* ordered 250 men to march out of the market square. The men were told they would build a ghetto for the women and children in the nearby forest.⁷ As the final group of men marched into the forest a survivor saw that deep trenches once used to keep cattle away from the sacred ground of the Old Cemetery were being used for a mass grave.⁸ After seeing hundreds of her fellow Eishyshokians forced to their death, Zipporah realized she needed to abandon her mother in order to reunite with her husband and children. She escaped the horse market, slipping past preoccupied guards and hid in the forest.⁹ The next morning, women and children were transported to a freshly dug pit near a Catholic cemetery outside of town. Two young men who escaped

⁷ It was clear that the men did not believe what they were told. As they neared the Old Cemetery they began to chant the Vidduy, which is the confession recited on the verge of death. See Eliach, *There Once Was A World*, 587.

⁸ Zvi Michalowiski's survived because his father pushed him into the grave just before the gunfire began. He then fell on top of him, mortally wounded, and his body served as Zvi's shield. Zvi laid still for a few hours, immobilized at first by the weight of the bodies around him and the stiffness of his own, which was covered in dried blood, finally he gradually managed to push the bodies aside and crawl out of the open grave, miraculously unharmed. He remembered, "the trenches were filled with bodies of men, overflowing with a river of blood." See Eliach, *There Once Was A World*, 589.

⁹ Ibid., 588.

the massacre the day before watched in horror as women and children were marched to their deaths by Nazis.¹⁰

Eliach's family was reunited in Radun, Poland, a few weeks after the massacre. In 1944 Eliach's father visited Eishyshok and decided that it would be safe for his family to return home. Within a few months, the Polish AK (*Armia Krajowa*) marched into the shtetl. Eliach's family quickly gathered together in an attic-like closet to hide from soldiers who were searching her family's house. The AK discovered the hiding place, and murdered Eliach's mother and infant brother. Before she was killed, Zipporah told the soldiers that she and her baby were alone, therefore the soldiers did not continue to search the home and the rest of the family survived. After the devastating experience, Eliach, her father, and brother left Eishyshok for good. They first traveled to Eretz Israel and then to the United States in the early 1960s. Eliach received her Bachelor of Arts (1967) and her Master of Arts (1969) from Brooklyn College in New York and her Ph. D. in Russian intellectual history from City University of New York (1973). She joined the faculty in the Department of Judaic Studies at Brooklyn College in 1969 and beginning in 1980 she served as founding director of the United States' first Center for Holocaust Studies. The role as director prompted her research on Eishyshok. During a 1981 interview she recalled, "It was clear to me that I had to bring the town back to life. ... I was determined that these Jews would not be remembered only as victims."¹¹

While Eliach collected oral histories, letters, documents, and photographs related to Eishyshok, the United States government initiated plans for a national museum about

¹⁰ Ibid., 592.

¹¹ Linenthal, "The Boundaries of Memory," 414.

the Holocaust. On May 1, 1978, United States President Jimmy Carter announced the formation of the President's Commission on the Holocaust, which was charged with recommending an appropriate United States memorial to the victims of the Holocaust. By the time planning began, a canonical reading of the Holocaust had been established, due in part to survivor, author, and Chairman of the President's Commission Elie Wiesel. He presented a report from the President's Commission in 1979; it called attention to his belief that the Holocaust had to be remembered for the sake of humankind. The report noted that failure to remember the victims would "mean to become accomplices to their murders. Remembrance was important to ... defeat the conspiracy of silence."¹² The report characterized the Holocaust as

the systematic, bureaucratic extermination of six million Jews by the Nazis and their collaborators as a central act of state during the Second World War. As night descended, millions of other people were swept into this net of death.... Never before in human history had genocide been an all-pervasive government policy unaffected by territorial or economic advantage and unchecked by moral constraints.¹³

The following year, as the purpose for the President's Commission came to a close, Congress unanimously voted to establish the United States Holocaust Memorial Council, which was charged with carrying out recommendations for planning, construction, and operation of a permanent memorial to the Holocaust. Eliach worked with the Council in an advisory capacity to establish the museum.¹⁴

¹² Elie Wiesel, *Report to the President: President's Commission on the Holocaust* (September 27, 1979), 5-6.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁴ Michael Berenbaum, *The World Must Know: The History of the Holocaust* (New York: Little Brown and Company, 1993), 20.

Before contracting an architect or designer, land needed to be acquired for the building. Council members, including Eliach, suggested that New York City would be an appropriate location for the memorial museum. It was considered the “center of the Jewish population in the United States and the cultural crossroads of the modern world,” metaphorically serving as “a cradle of liberty to all coming to America.”¹⁵ However, the other proposed location, on or near the National Mall, in Washington, DC, was ultimately selected. Irving Bernstein, council member and Executive Vice-Chairman of the United Jewish Appeal, asserted that a Washington site would signify that the federal government, and in turn the United States population, was concerned with commemorating the Holocaust.¹⁶ Raul Hilberg, council member and Holocaust scholar, pointed out that in Washington, as opposed to New York City, there would be ample space to build. This was necessary because, as he noted,

The size of the building must be large enough to permit us to do the things that we have talked about during the last few years. Our principal theme was that of a ‘living’ memorial.... Above all we must remember that the building will be our statement about the Holocaust. If *it* is too small, so is our memory.¹⁷

A plot of land was successfully obtained between 14th Street and 15th Street, south of the Washington Monument and north of the Jefferson Memorial, in between the Tidal Basin

¹⁵ Edward T Linenthal, *Preserving Memory: The Struggle to Create America's Holocaust Museum*, (New York: Viking, 1995), 58.

¹⁶ Ibid., 61.

¹⁷ Ibid., 73.

and the sprawling green lawn of the National Mall. Following months of architectural competition, the Council selected architect James Ingo Freed to design the museum.¹⁸

In 1988, with a story line shaped by curators, blank floor plans, and a list of small artifacts, exhibit designer Ralph Appelbaum began work on a permanent exhibition to fill the building.¹⁹ Appelbaum and a team of curators traveled to Europe to collect historically relevant artifacts, including a German railcar in which victims were transported to death camps, a Danish rescue boat, a Torah Ark defaced during Kristallnacht, a ghetto cart that residents had used to transport loaves of bread before it was used to transport corpses, four thousand shoes taken from Holocaust victims, and dismantled barracks from Auschwitz. A worldwide call for artifacts, issued in the late 1980s, resulted in a collection of more than ten thousand authentic Holocaust-era objects including documents, letters, diaries, artworks, clothing, photographs, and utilitarian and household objects created in the camps, in ghettos, or in hiding. Despite the scope of artifacts acquired, Appelbaum felt that the overall collection seemed to be “a motley of happenstance and cast offs.”²⁰ Therefore museum curators sought additional material that would provide a personal perspective of the Holocaust.²¹ Hence their interest in the Yaffa

¹⁸ Freed was born in Essen, Germany, in 1930. He immigrated to Chicago in 1939 where he later studied architecture at Illinois Institute of Technology. See Linenthal, *Preserving Memory*, 145.

¹⁹ Appelbaum was raised in a secular Jewish family and trained as an industrial designer at the Pratt Institute of Art. See Linenthal, *Preserving Memory*, 145.

²⁰ Ibid., 146.

²¹ Michael Berenbaum, *The World Must Know: The History of the Holocaust As Told in The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum* (Washington, D.C.: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2006), xxi.

Eliach Shtetl Collection, which is comprised of everyday photographs that are also extraordinary survivor artifacts.²² For Eliach, the photographs were a personal collection of mementos that depicted her family, friends, and life in Eishyshok before it was destroyed. She intended to use the photographs to create a memorial that would visually re-create the shtetl and specifically remember Eishyshokians who were victims of atrocity. Museum curators added to this narrative and used the collection for another purpose – to facilitate a connection to the Holocaust for visitors who may not have a direct association with the tragic event. The photographs not only depicted a paradigmatic Jewish shtetl but the images were also conventional family photographs that visitors could associate with easily. The exhibition design also aided in facilitating a connection to the Holocaust through the collection. The following chapter will consider these design elements, including how the collection of photographs is displayed, the text panels provided to visitors, and the layout of the exhibition as it relates to the overall design of the museum.

²² Museum curators knew Eliach was working on the collection from Raye Farr's interview with her for the television series "The Struggles of Poland," and because of her role on the commission and council. See Linenthal, "The Boundaries to Memory," 416.

Chapter Two

Museum professionals involved with the creation of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum intended for the institution to preserve objects that elicit memories, provide exhibition galleries as well as a place of mourning, and present the history of the Holocaust while raising questions, perhaps unanswerable, associated with unprecedented genocide.²³ This specific type of museum, according to museum studies scholar Paul Williams, commemorates a historical event of mass suffering or an atrocity of some kind. Memorial museums serve two functions, “to add both a moral framework to the narration of a terrible historical event and more in-depth contextual explanations to commemorative acts.”²⁴ Like conventional history museums, the USHMM offers factual accounts of the past, but it was also developed in collaboration with people who have a personal relationship to the historical event. This chapter will suggest the layout of the exhibition and scrutinize the characteristics that distinguish it from the rest of the museum, including the type of objects exhibited and suggests that the Tower of Faces, one section of the permanent exhibition, is a monument within a memorial museum. The exhibition design, as well as how the photographs and information are displayed, distinguish the Tower of Faces from the rest of the museum while still relating and adding to the overall narrative.

²³ "About the Museum - Mission Statement," *The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*, <http://www.ushmm.org/museum/mission>.

²⁴ Paul Harvey Williams, *Memorial Museums: The Global Rush to Commemorate Atrocities*, (Oxford: Berg, 2007), 8.

According to English and Judaic Studies professor, James E. Young, monuments “refer to a subset of memorial: the material objects, sculptures, and installation used to memorialize.”²⁵ A memorial can be a gathering, a conference, a day, or a physical space, while a monument is always a physical structure at a specific site.²⁶ Williams similarly explains that a memorial “serves in remembrance of a person or event. As such, it can take a non-material form (such as a holiday or song),” while monuments serving a memorial purpose are, “characterized by their physical appearance.”²⁷ Memorial museums must rely on material objects when amassing a collection, especially when designing a monument that also functions as an exhibition, as with the Tower of Faces. But survivors of orchestrated violence that aims to annihilate are typically left object-poor and therefore, the size and scope of memorial museum collections are relatively narrow.

Residents who remained in Eishyshok up to or beyond the 1941 massacre were able to provide accounts of the shtetl’s final days, but their possessions were fewer in number and much more damaged than those belonging to pre-war emigrants who left Eishyshok.²⁸ Fortunately, not all survivors lost everything; like Eliach, some

²⁵ James E. Young, *Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (Yale UP, 1994), 3-4.

²⁶ Ibid., 4.

²⁷ Williams, 7-8.

²⁸ Many photos and written documents were damaged or completely lost because they were hastily buried in the ground, stashed in myriad hiding places, or left for safekeeping with generous Christian neighbors. See Eliach, *There Once Was a World*, 9.

Eishyshokians were able to strap photographs and documents to their bodies, line them in suitcases, or stuff them in the soles of shoes as they escaped atrocities. Eliach recalled,

Though I was only a little girl, I knew enough to treasure my few remaining family photos—and to hide them in my shoes in order to conceal my true identity. I kept them during all the months of our travels.... It was only after we arrived in Palestine ... on April 5, 1946, did I remove them.²⁹

The limited amount of material that survived makes the objects that are displayed, like Eliach's photographs, all the more poignant and remarkable.³⁰ The precious photographs of the Shtetl Collection are displayed in a structure planned by architect James Ingo Freed. Rather than display the photographs in an easily accessible alcove, which would have allowed visitors to peruse the collection without much difficulty, he designed one entire side of the museum with a row of gigantic towers that visitors must walk through to get from one level to the next of the permanent exhibitions. Exhibition designer Ralph Appelbaum's concept for the towers was to disrupt the chronological permanent exhibition with mini-exhibitions that would present one aspect of the Holocaust while enhancing the overall narrative. The Shtetl Collection was an ideal selection for one of the towers insofar as it depicted shtetl life and represented victims of the *Einsatzgruppen*, which were not portrayed in the rest of the museum.

The Tower of Faces is monumental in size. It is 54-feet in height, yet the area of the Tower, 16-feet-by-28-feet at its widest section, is constricting because all four three-story walls are angled inward and covered with 1,032 individual photographs from the base on the third floor of the museum to the fifth floor ceiling. The photographs range

²⁹ Ibid., 10.

³⁰ Williams, 25.

from one foot to three feet in height, all individually laminated, and arranged in a collage-like display, which is mounted on a lattice frame. Most of the collected photographs are the last surviving examples of the original; therefore digital copies are displayed for preservation purposes. They were not retouched or altered in any way and retain characteristics such as fading, scratches, stains, color, and scalloped or cut edges. Some photographs include handwritten text made by the original owner directly on the image, providing names, dates, or inscriptions (for example see figure 2). Without individual labels for each photograph, the exhibition functions as a single display of images and the collection is viewed by visitors as a whole rather than photograph by photograph. There is a clear break from the permanent exhibition when visitors enter the Tower of Faces, both in terms of architecture and content. The tower is primarily constructed of steel, glass, and brick, like the rest of the USHMM. But while other exhibitions are presented on a single level with horizontally oriented galleries, the structure is vertically oriented and spans multiple floors of the museum.

Visitors encounter the Tower of Faces twice as they traverse the permanent exhibition. Judaic Studies scholar Laura Levitt proposes that the exhibition was positioned this way so that visitors have multiple vantage points and can return to the photographs again and again.³¹ Following an elevator ride to the top floor of the museum, visitors begin a self-guided tour of each floor, which is a designated chapter or act of the permanent exhibition narrative presented in chronological order. The galleries include text panels, historical videos, maps, newspapers, written and spoken witness testimony,

³¹ Laura Levitt, "Returning to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum: The Tower of Faces Ten Years Later." In *Photographs, Histories, and Meanings*, ed. Marlene Kadar et al. (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 226.

interactive multi-media computers, Holocaust-era artifacts, and large photomurals.

Visitors initially encounter the Tower of Faces while walking between the first act, “The Rise of Nazism: 1933-1939,” which concerns the pre-Holocaust era, and the second act, “The Final Solution: 1940-1945,” which addresses Nazi atrocities and victims’ experiences. The Tower of Faces is encountered a second time as visitors traverse between the second act and the third act, “The Final Chapter,” which presents liberation and survivors’ experiences as they immigrated or returned home.

The wall label, titled “A Shtetl: The Ejszyszki Shtetl Collection,” is located before the exhibition’s first entrance and provides historical background and context for the photographs. It reads, in part,

The photographs in this tower were taken between the years 1890 and 1941 in Eishishok. The cemetery tombstones bore witness to the fact that Jews lived in Eishishok for almost 900 years. The Jewish community had a rich religious culture and an energetic secular life.

Most of these photographs were taken by Yitzhak Uri Katz; his wife, Alte Katz; their assistant Ben-Zion Szrejder; and Raphael Lejobowicz, all photographers in Eishishok. In the studio, at parties and ceremonies, in homes and public buildings, and in the town’s streets and meeting places, their work portrays the life of the community.

The photographs gathered from more than 100 families were collected by Dr. Yaffa Eliach, who spent her early childhood years in Eishishok and is the granddaughter of Yitzhak Uri Katz and Alte Katz.³²

Michael Berenbaum, the USHMM’s Project Director after the museum opened, notes that the rhetorical style of this text is compatible with the “general spirit of the exhibition whose power lies very much in understatement.”³³ The language is concise and factual,

³² Eishyshok is the Yiddish name for Ejszyszki, as it is known in Polish, and Eiskes in Lithuanian. Eishishok is an alternative Yiddish spelling.

³³ Berenbaum, *The World Must Know* (1993), 70.

explaining the historic event without hyperbole or emotional verbiage. The text does not yet reveal what happened to the residents, although visitors may grasp the fact that Eishyshokians were ill fated since the exhibition is part of an overall devastating narrative of the Holocaust.

The wall text identifies Eliach as the collector and reveals her personal relationship with the photographs as the granddaughter of some of the photographers, but information regarding her elaborate and conscientious curatorial work is not included. The display may appear to be a random ordering of images, or perhaps one that is aesthetically designed, but this is not the case. Since Eliach spent her childhood in Eishyshok and came from a family that had been living in the shtetl for generations she was privy to information that influenced the layout. For example, she arranged the photographs so that depictions of feuding families would not be near each other, whereas depictions of neighbors would be placed next to one other. Additionally, creating the Tower of Faces was an intimate act of remembrance for Eliach; therefore she placed people who were personally important to her and to the town in prominent locations. The photographs of her mother, Zipporah, of her father holding her shortly before the massacre, of her family, and of the shtetl's last revered religious leader before the 1941 massacre, Rabbi Szymen Rozowski, are all positioned near the center of either the first or second access point and at eye-level (see figures 3-6). However, because identification labels do not accompany each photograph, the people pictured remain anonymous, and visitors are unaware of Eliach's curatorial decisions. Though this may seemingly diminish Eliach's role regarding the exhibition, it is necessary in order for a wider

audience to connect with the collection and for visitors to commemorate the Holocaust; this will be discussed further in the third chapter.

During the first encounter, the photographs in the Tower of Faces are contextualized within the permanent exhibition's first chapter by illustrating another aspect of Eastern European life prior to the Holocaust.³⁴ Marianne Hirsch, professor of English and Comparative Literature, upon initially entering the Tower, marveled at the rich and varied the life that was destroyed. The photographs span over fifty years, from 1890 to 1941; in the images "we see observant as well as assimilated Jews. We see young and old. We see a great range of class and economic backgrounds – laborers and scholars, farmers and professionals. We see an even greater range of activities: bicycling, eating, boating, mourning, reading, walking, posing with friends or alone."³⁵ More than just conventional familial images, as Hirsch explains, the photographs represent what no longer is, but also what has been and what has been violently destroyed.³⁶

The second chapter of the permanent exhibition illustrates the Nazi assault on European Jews. The galleries contain artifacts, images, and witness testimonies that demonstrate the conditions in ghettos, during exportation, and at concentration camps. Hirsch recalls that the second encounter with the Tower of Faces occurred "[a]fter walking through a railcar used in Polish deportation, seeing a model of the gas chambers and crematoria in Auschwitz, walking by a pile of shoes brought from Auschwitz and seeing an actual oven from Mauthausen."³⁷ When visitors encounter the photographs for

³⁴ Eliach, *There Once Was A World*, 5.

³⁵ Hirsch, *Family Frames*, 252.

³⁶ Hirsch, *Family Frames*, 23.

³⁷ Hirsch, *Family Frames*, 255.

the second time the mood of the permanent exhibition has become ominous, as they have viewed photographic evidence and read descriptive text about the atrocities.

The wall panel leading into the second encounter explains what happened to the residents of Eishyshok. “The End of a Shtetl” panel reads, in part,

On September 21, the eve of the Jewish New Year, an SS mobile killing squad entered the town, accompanied by Lithuanian volunteers. Four thousand Jews from Eishishok and its environs were herded into three synagogues and imprisoned there.

Three days later on September 24, the Jews were taken from the synagogue to a horse market on the outskirts of town. The next day, the men were led in groups of 250 from the marketplace to the old Jewish cemetery. There, the SS men ordered them to undress and to stand at the edge of open pits, where they were shot by Lithuanian guards. On September 26, the women and children were shot near the Christian cemetery.

Nine hundred years of Jewish life and culture in Eishishok came to an end in two days. Today, no Jews live in Eishyshok.

The text is without embellishment or overly emotional language even though the subject matter is tragic. Though visitors are in the same physical structure that they previously encountered, the second experience of the exhibition is distinct because the lower section of the tower differs architecturally from the first section. Visitors standing on the glass bridge on the first level disrupt light from the skylight, creating a darker and more ominous space than the previous section. Additionally, since the walls of the tower are angled slightly inwards towards the ceiling, the second exhibition area at the base of the tower is slightly more spacious than the first.

On both levels, the installation design precludes visitors’ ability to closely examine each of the photographs. During the first encounter, visitors stand on a glass bridge that is suspended between two of the four walls and prevents them from standing

directly before the photographs. Some photographs can be viewed more closely during the second encounter, as visitors are able to get directly in front of a photograph. But, in this position, at the very bottom of the tower, it is even more evident how many of the individual photographs are out of view. As Levitt notes, visitors “see all of those we will never encounter, image upon image, illustrating the extent to which the totality of the losses of even this one Jewish town remains out of our reach, outside of our comprehension.”³⁸

Just as the Tower of Faces is physically distinctive from the museum, the familial photographs in the Shtetl Collection photographs are dramatically different from atrocity images, which are displayed throughout the three chapters of the permanent exhibition and explicitly depict emaciated bodies at concentration camps, piles of dead and naked bodies, people beaten in the streets of ghettos, as well as men, women, and children herded like cattle onto trains and into gas chambers.³⁹ Though atrocity images of Nazi crimes serve as vital testimony, when museum visitors suffer from overexposure of atrocity images the iconic representations of human evil may no longer resonate.⁴⁰ Referring to the numbing effect caused by the oversaturation of atrocity images, journalist Barbie Zelizer asserts, “The mounds of corpses, gaping piles of bodies, and figures angled like matchsticks across the camera’s field of vision have paralyzed many

³⁸ Levitt, 226.

³⁹ Holocaust-era atrocity images are especially noteworthy because they marked the beginning of documenting atrocity on a wide scale. See Barbie Zelizer, *Remembering to Forget: Holocaust Memory Through the Camera's Eye* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1998), 12.

⁴⁰ Susan A. Crane, “Choosing Not to Look: Representation, Repatriation, and Holocaust Atrocity Photography,” *History and Theory* 47 (2008), 309.

of us to the point of critical inattention.”⁴¹ As Susan Sontag explains, “In a world saturated, no, hyper-saturated with images, those that should matter have a diminishing effect: we become callous.”⁴² The photographs in the Shtetl Collection depict Jews as living and thriving individuals who were part of a community before it was affected by the Holocaust. Linenthal has noted that the Tower of Faces is a powerful space because the exhibition “portrays those murdered in a way apart from Nazi definitions – prisoner, inmate, victim.”⁴³ In this sense, the photographs represent the consequences of unprecedented genocide implicitly, rather than explicitly.

Once the Shtetl Collection photographs were displayed in the museum, they no longer functioned solely as intimate, visual keepsakes, as they did for Eliach and other Eishyshokians who kept them. The next chapter will look at this alternative purpose for the photographs and how the Holocaust is presented to visitors through, what Hirsch describes as, retrospective witnessing by adoption.⁴⁴ The chapter will focus on the vernacular characteristics of the photographs on display as they create a space of identification for viewers participating in the conventions of familial representation, thus, bridging the gap between those who are personally connected to the Holocaust and those who are not. Though Hirsch’s theory was formed to explain how survivors’ children comprehend the Holocaust, the way in which museum curators use the photographs in Tower of Faces expands the postmemorial circle to potentially include all visitors.

⁴¹ Zelizer, *Remembering to Forget*, 1.

⁴² Susan Sontag, *Regarding The Pain Of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 105.

⁴³ Linenthal, *Preserving Memory*, 181.

⁴⁴ Hirsch, *Surviving Images*, 221.

Chapter Three

Though the Shtetl Collection was acquired by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum to depict shtetl life prior to the Holocaust, to exemplify atrocious acts performed by mobile killing squads, and to facilitate a connection to the Holocaust for visitors, this was not the original intention of the photographs. The photographs were once intimate and personal images significant to Eishyshokians; they were typically kept in domestic spaces or were sent to relatives and close friends abroad as a way to share news about special events, celebrations, or the developments of family life. Over time, the context of the photographs has changed and now they form a multipurpose collection. The Shtetl Collection photographs are not unique in this aspect; as archaeologists Chris Gosden and Yvonne Marshall, evaluating Igor Kopytoff's theory about the cultural biography of objects, have noted, "Not only do objects change through their existence, but they often have the capacity of accumulating histories, so that the present significance of an object derives from the person and events to which it is connected."⁴⁵ The photographs on display in the Tower of Faces are simultaneously extraordinary survivor artifacts that recall a tragic and personal history, and everyday photographs that represent universal suffering. Eliach herself refers to the collection as "survivor photographs," since they endured unimaginable atrocities. Additionally, Marianne Hirsch argues, "Holocaust photographs, as much as their subjects, are themselves stubborn survivors of

⁴⁵ Chris Gosden and Yvonne Marshall, "The Cultural Biography of Objects," *World Archaeology* 31.2 (1999): 170.

the intended destruction of an entire culture, its people, as well as all their records, documents, and cultural artifacts.”⁴⁶

The photographs began as ordinary vernacular images and retain their vernacular qualities in the current exhibition. They were produced for largely personal reasons, for example, to commemorate a family or town event, to memorialize objects of personal importance.⁴⁷ This specific type of image, the vernacular or familial photograph, according to philosopher Gillian Rose, is “one of the most ubiquitous and familiar sorts of visual images.”⁴⁸ This sense of familiarity encourages visitors to identify with and make connections to those pictured, humanizing the Holocaust for those without a direct connection to the event. According to photography historian Linda Warley, photographs of families “can affect powerful emotional responses partly because they are so familiar.”⁴⁹ This familiarity is largely derived from the affiliative quality of the photograph. Although the Shtetl Collection photographs have specific and personal meaning for Eliach, which may be lost outside that narrow construct, the images are shaped by similar conventions that are, according to Hirsch, “readily available for identification across the broadest and most radical divides.”⁵⁰ For example, visitors who

⁴⁶ Hirsch, *Family Frames*, 23.

⁴⁷ Douglas R. Nickel, *Snapshots: The Photography of Everyday Life, 1888 to the Present* (San Francisco Museum, 1998), 12.

⁴⁸ Gillian Rose, *Doing Family Photography: The Domestic, The Public and The Politics of Sentiment* (Farnham, England: Ashgate, 2010), 11.

⁴⁹ Linda Warley, “Introduction,” in *Photographs, Histories, and Meanings*, eds. Marlene Kadar, Jeanne Perreault, and Linda Warley, (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 7.

⁵⁰ Marianne Hirsch, *The Familial Gaze* (Hanover, NH: University of New England, 1999), xiii.

view the photograph of a wedding of two Eishyshokians in the Tower may not know the people in the photograph or precisely when it was taken, but visitors can recognize that it is a wedding because of the traditional white wedding dress and wedding-party posed portrait (see figure 7). This realization and subsequent emotional connection is not based on specific or personal details concerning those pictured, but rather on a general understanding of the type of occasion depicted.

Cindy Miller, the USHMM's first Project Director, realized that one of the most useful attributes of Shtetl Collection was this connection to the familial and vernacular. After looking at an overwhelming amount of photographs from the collection while sitting Eliach's Brooklyn home for eight hours, she recalled being completely stunned and noted, "The power of the photographs, the way they communicated the evolving life of the town and the familiar feel of family photographs; the scalloped edges, cut in the shape of hearts to become parts of cards, stained edges, cut edges, edges that had been colored and pasted down. What one saw was the entire vibrancy of a small shtetl.... [W]e wanted to preserve that character."⁵¹ The exhibition design draws attention to the vernacular characteristics of the photographs through a display that mimics the presentation of photographs arranged in a conventional family album. Hirsch recognized that if the Tower of Faces is a family album then visitors are situated right inside of it.⁵² They are surrounded by black and white photographs that are eerily recognizable and allow for a different type of recognition than other images in the museum that also illustrate the Holocaust.

⁵¹ Linenthal, *Preserving Memory*, 180-81.

⁵² Hirsch, *Family Frames*, 252

Additionally, the Tower of Faces is related to *yisker biher* books, a specific type of memorial book that is prepared in exile by survivors of genocide and intended to preserve the memory of their destroyed cultures and Jewish victims. The books, which could be produced individually or collectively by a community, combine written testimony, photographs, drawings, and records of daily life. The term, *yisker biher*, literally “tombstones of paper” in Yiddish, describes the religious and historical obligation to remember communities that were affected by atrocity through memorial books.⁵³ Survivor and author Henri Raczymow notes that many Jewish communities think of the books as markers that “take the place for those who had no graves.”⁵⁴ Since many Eishyshokians were victims of mass murder and disposed of by Nazis into a mass grave, there are no individual gravestones for the victims of the 1941 massacre. The collage of photographs from the Shtetl Collection on the walls of the Tower of Faces, function as pages from a *yisker biher* book, and simultaneously commemorate and provide a visual record of a specific devastated community. Hence, as Hirsch asserts, *yisker biher* books are sites of postmemory where visitors can commemorate a time and place they never actually experienced. The Tower of Faces is Eliach’s *yisker biher* book, a personal memorial filled with photographs that belonged to her and other Eishyshokians, which she has shared with subsequent generations of visitors.

The collection and how visitors are able to emotionally approach the photographs exemplifies Marianne Hirsch’s theory on postmemory. This theory explains how

⁵³ Nathan Wachtel, “Remember and Never Forget,” in *Between Memory and History*, ed. Marie-Noelle Bourgeut, et al. (Chur, Switzerland: Harwood Academic, 1990), 102.

⁵⁴ Henri Raczymow, “Memory Shot Through With Holes,” *Yale French Studies* 85 (1994): 101.

generations following the Holocaust-era “remember” the event through shared memories of those who actually experienced the atrocities. While reminiscing about her own experience growing up in the United States during the post-Holocaust era, Hirsch explains that it is only through memories, provided by the first-generation, the people who actually experienced the event, that the subsequent generations can fathom the horrific experience.⁵⁵ Hirsch asserts postmemory to be “a powerful form of memory precisely because the connection to its object of source is mediated not through recollection but through representation, projection, and creation.”⁵⁶ Postmemory consists not of the direct recollection of events, but of the retrospective witnessing of events through representations like personal narratives, historical chronologies, and photographs. When visitors encounter the Tower of Faces, the photographs prompt them to memorialize the victims of the Holocaust as secondary witnesses and experience the emotional devastation through the photographs. Hirsch notes, “The conventionality of the family photo provides a space for identification for *any* viewer participating in the connections of familial representations; thus the photos can bridge the gap between viewers who are personally connected to the event and those who are not.”⁵⁷ Eliach recognized that the museum would be able to use the collection in such a way. She commented in an interview in 1998, “I hope that when people stand on the bridge in the

⁵⁵ Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames*, 22.

⁵⁶ Marianne Hirsch, "Surviving Images: The Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory," in *Visual Culture and the Holocaust*, ed. Barbie Zelizer (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2001), 220.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 251.

museum, in the middle of my town, they say ‘my God, this looks like my family.’”⁵⁸ This is precisely why the exhibition lacks conventional museum labels, which would identify the specific people or occasions depicted. The anonymity of the Tower of Faces contributes to a kind of collective visitor experience, a sense of universal loss, and allows for a boarder memorialization of the Holocaust.

While Eliach embarked upon what Pierre Nora described as “a quest for memory and the search for one’s history,” the museum presents the collection as visual representation of the Holocaust and of shtetl life that was ruined.⁵⁹ The exhibition simultaneously serves both Eliach’s and the museum’s purpose. For Eliach, creating the exhibition was a way to personally memorialize the loss of Eishyshok, her childhood home, family, and friends. Art historian Andrea Liss explains that the exhibition partakes of this memorial tradition as it structurally overlaps “historical and memorial narratives so that the exuberance of peoples’ lives is conveyed as vividly as their destruction.”⁶⁰ However, the objects now carry “the much weightier task of restoring identity and individuality to the otherwise anonymous victims of the Nazis.”⁶¹ They are no longer merely photographs of smiling children in a class photo, friends spontaneously posing with their arms around each other after skating on the local frozen pond, a family studio

⁵⁸ Yaffa Eliach, "There Once Was a World," (*Miami Book Fair International*: C-SPAN, 22 Nov. 1998).

⁵⁹ Pierre Nora. "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux De Memoire." *Representations* 26.1 (1989): 13.

⁶⁰ Andrea Liss, *Trespassing Through Shadows: Memory, Photography, and the Holocaust* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1998), 34.

⁶¹ Yaffa Eliach, *We Were Children Just Like You*. Brooklyn (NY: Center for Holocaust Studies, Documentation and Research, 1990), 6-7.

portrait taken to commemorate a new birth, or a large group of Eishyshokians gathered to celebrate the joyous occasion of a wedding between a local man and woman. Now the photographs represent a connection for visitors to the Holocaust itself and those photographed are forever associated with their tragic fate. The Tower of Faces is both a specific and personal memorial for Eishyshok created by Eliach and a universal expression of unprecedented genocide perpetuated by the museum's exhibition designers and curators.

Conclusion

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's Shtetl Collection photographs on display in the Tower of Faces foster a poignant connection between the historical event of the Holocaust, the memories of survivors like Yaffa Eliach who experienced the horrors, and visitors who go to the museum in order to understand and commemorate unprecedented genocide. The exhibition is multivalent, as it is a personal memorial created by Eliach for the shtetl community of Eishyshok, which was annihilated in 1941, and an anonymous display of familial photographs that represent a universal connection to the Holocaust for visitors. The characteristics of the exhibition are possible because of the type of the photographs that constitute the collection and the way in which the collection and information are displayed.

The exhibition space is three stories high and does not include traditional identifying labels for the 1,032 photographs that cover all four walls from floor to ceiling in a collage-like display. These design elements emphasize that the photographs are gathered together and the exhibition presents a narrative that is grander than the individual images could possibly produce alone. As Hirsch notes, "the pictures gain by their diversity and their multiplicity: after looking at it [the Tower] for a while, it becomes less important to see individual images than to take in a sense of the whole."⁶² The physically overwhelming structure seemingly contrasts the intimate characteristics of

⁶² Marianne Hirsch, "Past Lives: Postmemories in Exile," *Poetics Today* 17.4 (1996): 671.

the Shtetl Collection photographs, which depict the ordinary lives of Eishyshokians from 1890 to 1941. But the photographs are not just ordinary vernacular images; they are also extraordinary survivor objects, which universally represent atrocities that took place during the Holocaust.

Creating the Tower of Faces was a collaborative effort between Eliach, museum curators, and exhibition designers; therefore it is conceivable that the exhibition is multivalent. Both Eliach and museum planners were chiefly concerned with preserving memory and providing information. Eliach intended for the exhibition to be a significant monument dedicated to and visually depicting her family, friends, and other residents of Eishyshok. She hoped that the monument would, metaphorically at least, visually re-create the shtetl that was destroyed. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum acquired the collection as way to humanize the Holocaust, depict shtetl communities prior to their demise, and describe the acts of Nazi mobile killing squads. The nature of the photographs and the exhibition design both facilitate visitors' ability to understand and remember the Holocaust as a historical event and emotional experience and it is through visitors' postmemorial experience that memory is preserved and information is attained.

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Figures

Figure 1. The Tower of Faces. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, DC, <http://www.ushmm.org/information/press/press-kits/united-states-holocaust-memorial-museum-press-kit/tower-of-faces>.



Figure 2. Ben-Zion Szrejder, *Group portrait of Jewish children attending the Bar Mitzvah party of Avrelele Botwinik in Eisiskes, 1939*, photograph, The Shtetl Foundation.



Figure 3. Yitzhak Uri Katz, *Zipporah Katz (Sonenson)*, one of the *shtetl* Hebrew librarians, reads a book while lying in a field, 1926, photograph, The Shtetl Foundation.



Figure 4. Alte Katz *Moshe Sonenson holds his daughter Yaffa on the road leading to their summer cottage in Tetlance near Eisiskes*, 1941, photograph, The Shtetl Foundation.



Figure 5. Ben-Zion Szrejder, *Members of the Katz and Sonenson families pose in the backyard of Alte Katz's House, 1938*, photograph, The Shtetl Foundation.



Figure 6. Ben-Zion Szrejder, *Rabbi Szymen Rozowski*, c.1941, photograph, The Shtetl Foundation.

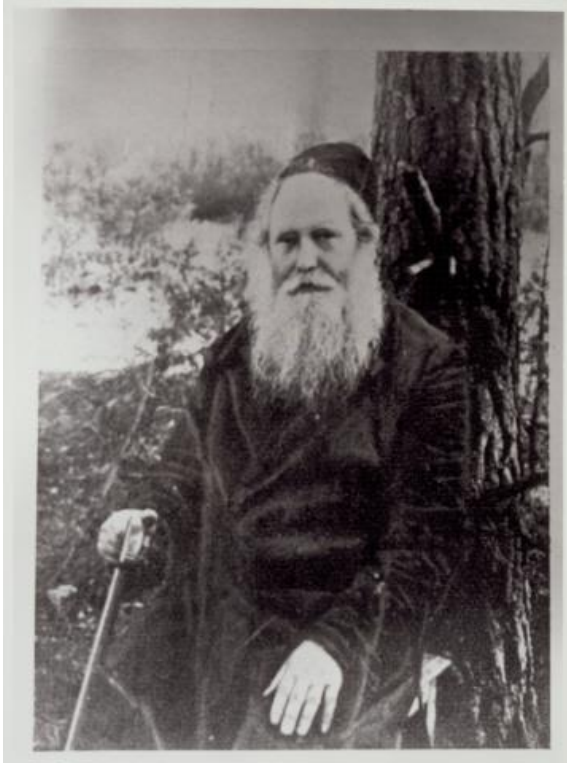


Figure 7. Ben-Zion Szrejder, *The Wedding of Bat-Sheva Razowski and Rabbi David Zalmanovitz from Ilya*, c.1932, photograph, The Shtetl Foundation.



Vita

Grace Champlain Astrove was born on December 23, 1987, in Richmond, Virginia, and is an American citizen. She graduated from The Steward School, Richmond, Virginia, in 2006. She received her Bachelor of Arts in Art History and Religious Studies from Connecticut College, New London, Connecticut, in 2010. She was an educational intern at The Florence Griswold Museum, Old Lyme, Connecticut, for three years during college, and was a curatorial intern and researcher for the Virginia Holocaust Museum, Richmond, Virginia, during graduate school. She received her Master of Arts in Art History from Virginia Commonwealth University in 2013 and is currently a curatorial intern at The Jewish Museum in New York.